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FOR NEA/ELA; NSC STAFF FOR KUMAR

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE PRESIDENT'S CAIRO VISIT

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) Mission Cairo welcomes your visit, the first by a U.S. president to Cairo since President Clinton's in 1990. The Egyptian Government will also warmly welcome you, as will the Egyptian people, who are proud that the U.S. has recognized what they view as Egypt's central role in the Arab and broader Islamic world. Your visit is a source of hope at a time when Egypt's young population is pessimistic about the future and concerned about the economic and social conditions, the Israeli-Arab peace process, and the apparent decline in Egypt's regional influence.

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Egyptian Religious Dynamics  
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¶2. (SBU) About ninety percent of Egypt's eighty-three million people are Muslim, mainly Sunni. Despite the predominance of Sunni Islam, Egyptian Islam is diverse and labels do not fit easily on the wide-range of competing ideas including Sufism, Salafism, political Islam represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, and what many Egyptian's view as "traditional" Egyptian Islam, symbolized by Egypt's Al Azhar. Egypt is also home to the largest Christian population (approximately 8-10 million) in the Middle East, overwhelmingly Coptic Orthodox.

¶3. (C) Religion plays an overarching role in Egyptian life, and Egyptians of all faiths view Egypt as central to the history and development of monotheism. Egyptians are proud of, and revere, sites where the Holy Family is reputed to have found refuge in Egypt. Muslims and Christians coexist in relative harmony, as did Jews before the 1952 Free Officers revolution, although Christian-Muslim relations have been strained in recent decades by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and conflict with the West. Muslims and Christians continue to celebrate each others important feast days, religious leaders of all faiths are treated as respected national figures, and birthday celebrations of Muslim and Christian historical religious figures are wildly popular.

¶3. (C) Al Azhar: Founded more than one thousand years ago by the Shi'a Fatamid dynasty, Al Azhar is a source of pride for Egyptians and is viewed as the preeminent educational institution in Sunni Islam. Although a number of its graduates have adopted extremist views - including "blind sheik" Omar Abdul Rahman - its curriculum is generally seen as moderate. In the last fifty years, it has expanded its curriculum to include the humanities, engineering and sciences and added women to its faculty and student body. Al Azhar also operates a national network of schools, providing primary and secondary education to an estimated one million children. Graduates of Al Azhar's secondary schools are guaranteed a place in Al Azhar's main Cairo campus or in one of ten satellite campuses, with a total enrollment of 170,000. There are about 40,000 foreign students from

throughout the Islamic world at Al Azhar. Since the 1952 Free Officers revolution, the GoE has tightly controlled Al Azhar's leadership. The Grand Sheik of Al Azhar, currently Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, is a GoE employee, and Al Azhar's fatwas (religious rulings) support GoE policy, to the detriment of Al Azhar's credibility on the Egyptian "street."

Al Azhar views itself as open to the West, and in recent years has condemned extremism and institutionalized inter-faith dialogue mechanisms. Its leadership publicly welcomed your visit to Cairo.

14. (C) Muslim Brotherhood: The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is Egypt's most popular and best organized opposition political/religious force. Although illegal since 1954, the group, which has formally renounced violence, is tolerated by and avoids direct confrontation with the GoE. "Independent" politicians affiliated with the MB hold 86 of the 444 seats in Egypt's parliament. The GoE rendered the MB less politically capable with mass arrests of leaders and members (currently, an estimated 250 MBs are in detention, including 56 arrested in recent weeks), military tribunals, and a ban on religiously-based political parties. The GoE views the MB as threatening not only the regime, but also the peace treaty with Israel and Egypt's religious tolerance. The GoE believes the MB is aligned with Hamas. The MB views itself as an Islamic reform movement (in contrast to what it sees as a conservative Egyptian religious establishment) and seeks to blend Islamic ideology with grass roots political activism. Although admiring of U.S. scientific and technological achievements, the MB is adamantly opposed to U.S. policy in the region. After the announcement of your visit, MB leader Mohammed Mahdi Akef characterized the trip as "useless"

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absent a change in U.S. policy.

15. (C) Salafists: Egyptian Muslims have become increasingly conservative over the past two decades, something many attribute to Saudi influence and money. Egypt has witnessed a striking increase in Salafism, a fundamentalist movement that seeks to emulate the Islam practiced at the time of the Prophet, and whose adherents disavow "modern" activities including politics. Salafism was founded by Al Azhar scholars in the late nineteenth century as an Islamic revival movement, but has become associated not only with a return to early Islam, but also violent extremism. Salafis are increasingly visible among Egypt's lower and middle classes and on university campuses. Egyptian Salafists' attitudes towards the U.S. and the West range from indifference among the most inward-looking to hostility.

16. (C) Sufis: Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that has long flourished in Egypt, has an estimated ten million Egyptian adherents, divided among seventy-five GoE-recognized Sufi orders. The religious and political views of each order are shaped in large part by the order's leader. Egyptian Sufis are seen as politically quietist, although historically Sufis have been politically active (MB founder Hasan al Bana was a Sufi), with a moderate view of Islam and a relatively open attitude towards the West.

17. (C) Christians: Egypt's Christians, an estimated ten percent of the population, share a common culture with their Muslim neighbors and generally live in relative harmony. They complain, however, of official discrimination in government hiring and in the licensing process for church construction and renovation. Egypt's quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights recently noted with alarm the rise in sectarian conflict in Egypt. Despite this, Egypt's Christians generally consider the GoE a bulwark against Islamic extremism. They are nervous that U.S. outreach to the Islamic world could somehow lessen the U.S. commitment to religious freedom and hope your speech recognizes Christianity's important, and ongoing, contribution to Egyptian society.

¶8. (C) Baha'is and Jews: Egypt's 2000 indigenous Baha'is have been much in the news recently as adherents struggled with a legal system that fails to recognize members of religions other than Islam, Christianity or Judaism. In recent months, the Baha'i have made substantial legal progress and the GoE has taken limited steps to address the issue. Egypt's Jewish community has been reduced by emigration to approximately 125 aging members in Cairo and Alexandria.

¶9. (C) The GoE and Religion: GoE leadership, especially the upper levels, view themselves as moderate Muslims, tolerant and protective of Egypt's religious minorities. The GoE's commitment to stability, however, can be greater than its commitment to religious freedom, and it is often unwilling to take decisions that might upset Egypt's religious balance. For instance, in cases of violence between Christians and Muslims, it often fails to impose criminal penalties, and instead seeks "reconciliation," an approach Egyptian Christians believe encourages further violence. Similarly, the GoE often refuses to grant permits for new church construction, arguing that more churches could fuel Muslim resentment, endangering Christians.

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Egyptian Religious Leaders You May Meet  
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¶10. (C) Egyptian religious leaders will be keen to attend your speech. You are likely to meet the following:

-- Dr. Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, Grand Imam of Al Azhar: Tantawi is the senior Muslim official in Egypt and head of Al Azhar, including the mosque, university and educational institutes, and its fatwa issuing body, the Islamic Research Council. The GoE appointed him Grand Imam in 1996 and he formerly served as Egypt's Mufti.

-- Dr. Ali Gom'aa, Mufti of the Republic: The Mufti is the second-ranking figure in Egyptian Islam, and is responsible for Egypt's fatwa issuing body, Dar Al-Iftah. The GoE appointed him Mufti in 2003, after a long career as a professor of jurisprudence at Al Azhar University. He is viewed as a proponent of moderate, Sufi-influenced Islam.

-- Pope Shenouda III: Pope Shenouda has served as leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church since 1971. He frequently visits the U.S., both for medical treatment and to meet with the

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U.S. Coptic community. Pope Shenouda is eighty-five and in poor health.

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What Are Egyptians Looking for in Your Speech?  
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¶11. (U) Publicly and privately, Egyptians were giddy over the results of the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The peaceful transfer of power was particularly appreciated here, and the sense that "America is back," was ubiquitous. Observers saw the election as our single most potent and effective democracy promotion "activity." The Egyptians are now looking for results and their expectations for your speech to the Islamic world are high and perhaps unrealistic.

¶12. (C) The Egyptian media and public saw the previous Administration as bent on regional hegemony and blind support for Israel at the Arabs' expense. Angered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and also dubious about Afghanistan, Egyptians sympathized with the ideal of 'resistance.' Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo convinced many that the U.S. was anti-Islam.

¶13. (C) Egyptians saw President Bush's approach to Israel as complicit with occupation, expansion of settlements and

what they saw as the inhuman blockade of Gaza. At the same time, however, there has been an Egyptian backlash against Hamas, driven primarily by Hamas' 2008 breach of the Gaza-Egypt border. Polls show the great majority of Egyptians consider America to be as great a threat to their security as Israel. Interestingly, your popularity in these polls is far greater than that of the U.S. as a whole.

¶14. (C) The overarching concern of our Egyptian interlocutors is the Arab-Israeli peace process. Egyptians recognize and appreciate the steps the U.S. has taken since the inauguration; maintaining support for a two state solution, the appointment of Special Envoy Mitchell, and U.S. support for Gaza reconstruction. Your audience will be listening for further tangible steps, specifically how the U.S. will deal with Prime Minister Netanyahu's lack of commitment to a Palestinian state and the continued Israeli expansion into the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

¶15. (C) Egyptians frequently decry the perceived lack of Western respect for their society and traditions. While Egyptians are generally open to the U.S., they are threatened by and resent what they see as attempts to impose foreign values. At the same time, younger Egyptians have little confidence in their own institutions' ability to deliver opportunities or a decent quality of life. While welcoming an open discussion of difficult issues, they will look for signs of appreciation and respect for their society and traditions. They deeply suspect U.S. and Western moves against other Islamic countries, including Iran. While most Egyptians resent Iranian interference in Egypt via Hezbollah and Hamas, the street is largely unconcerned by the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons. Israel has them, so why not Iran, is a common response.

¶16. (C) Your election restored the faith of many Egyptians in the American political system. Young Egyptians in particular have high expectations for your administration, but are also looking for change that will provide them hope for deliverance from a bleak personal economic future.

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